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California Church Must Pay $1.2 Million for Breaking COVID Rules + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to governments' abuse of power, including attacks on democracy, civil liberties and use of mass surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff

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California Church Must Pay $1.2 Million for Breaking COVID Rules

Associated Press reported:

> A California church that defied safety regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic by holding large, unmasked religious services must pay $1.2 million in fines, a judge has ruled.
>
> Calvary Chapel in San Jose was fined last week for ignoring Santa Clara County's mask-wearing rules between November 2020 and June 2021. The church will appeal, attorney Mariah Gondeiro told the San Jose Mercury News.
>
> Calvary was one of several large California evangelical churches that flouted state and local mask-wearing and social distancing rules designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during its deadliest period.
>
> That has led to a tangled web of court rulings and challenges. Calvary Chapel sued the county, arguing the health orders violated its religious freedom. Various courts have ruled either in favor of the church or the county.

Meta Urged to Halt Plans Allowing Minors Into the Metaverse

Bloomberg reported:

> Dozens of advocacy organizations and children's safety experts are calling on Meta Platforms Inc. to terminate its plans to allow minors into its new virtual reality world.

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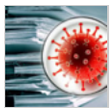
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Meta is planning to invite teenagers and young adults to join its metaverse app, Horizon Worlds, in the coming months. But the groups and experts that signed the letter, which was sent to Meta Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg on Friday, argue that minors will face harassment and privacy violations on the virtual reality app, which is only in its early stages.

"Meta must wait for more peer-reviewed research on the potential risks of the metaverse to be certain that children and teens would be safe," wrote the groups, led by online safety groups including Fairplay, the Center for Countering Digital Hate, Common Sense Media and others.

The letter points to a March report from the Center for Countering Digital Hate that found users under 18 are already facing harassment from adults on the app. Researchers with the center witnessed 19 episodes of abuse directed at minors by adults, including sexual harassment, during 100 visits to the most popular worlds within Horizon Universe.

Meta has faced widespread scrutiny over the effect of its products on the mental health of youngsters. A Facebook whistleblower in 2021 accused the company of placing profits over safety and failing to protect children, particularly teenage girls who spent excessive amounts of time on Instagram.

TikTok Might Be Part of a Plot to Make Us Dumber

The Washington Post reported:

> Palantir chief executive Alex Karp is best known for his artificial intelligence platform, but his biggest idea might be his insistence upon rescuing the West from influences that damage the nation's intelligence.
>
> I happened to catch Karp on CNBC's "Squawk Box" Thursday morning, talking to "Too Big to Fail" author Andrew Ross Sorkin about TikTok. When most people express concern about China's most insidious export as a national security threat, they tend to think about the platform's ability to retrieve massive amounts of data. They see TikTok as the ultimate spyware — a cartoonish medium that snatches our secrets while we're distracted by the vanities.
>
> Karp has a different take. He says China is deliberately and strategically using TikTok to make us, meaning the West, "dumber and slower." It's the ultimate sleeper agent and a weapon to weaken us from within. He isn't alone in his thinking. National Security Agency Director Gen. Paul Nakasone has warned that Chinese control of TikTok's algorithm could allow China to deploy influence operations among Western populations.

Lawyer: Return to Military Service a Challenge After Vaccine Mandate Lifted

Rochester First.com reported:

> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Military required service members to get the vaccine, with very few exceptions. Those refusing were usually given a 'general discharge' and had to leave their careers. The vaccine mandate was dropped, and some of those who left service, want to return.
>
> Military Law attorney Sean Timmons with Tully Rinckey PLLC has represented active duty and veterans for 15 years. He said for those separated when they refused the mandatory COVID-19 vaccine, it was a tough choice.
>
> "They ruined 10,000-plus careers by sabotaging people's livelihoods, throwing them out arbitrarily," he said. He said quite a few want back in now that the pandemic has waned and COVID vaccine requirements were lifted by the Department of Defense back in January.
>
> "Everyone else is kind of withering at the recruiting station to see if they're

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going to be eligible to get back in because they have to go back through the screening process," he said. Timmons said that includes background checks, physical fitness standards, and for some getting security clearances back, a process that takes months or years.

House Democrat Presses TikTok CEO for 'Unanswered' Questions on Data Privacy, Kids' Safety

The Hill reported:

> The top Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee is pressing TikTok to answer questions raised by members of the panel about data privacy, kids' online safety and national security concerns.
>
> Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (N.J.), ranking Democrat on the Energy and Commerce panel, sent a letter to TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew pressing him to address "unanswered questions" raised by members of the panel during a hearing with the top executive last month.
>
> "We were hoping that you could allay some of our concerns at the hearing, but unfortunately many of our questions remain unanswered," Pallone wrote, asking Shou to reply by April 27.
>
> The questions ask TikTok to detail how it collects and uses data, as well as specifically how it caters to minors on the platform.

Coalition Sues California Attorney General Over Alleged Social Media Censorship

The Epoch Times reported:

> A coalition including satire website The Babylon Bee, social media company Minds, Inc., and podcaster Tim Pool has sued California Attorney General Rob Bonta for enforcing a state law they claim is unconstitutional on the grounds it violates free speech.
>
> The legislation, authored by Assemblyman Jesse Gabriel (D-Encino), regulates social media platforms, requiring them to report data on the enforcement of their moderation policies to the state.
>
> "The public and policymakers deserve to know when and how social media companies are amplifying certain voices and silencing others," Gabriel said in a statement. "This is an important first step in a broader effort to protect our democracy and better regulate social media platforms."
>
> The law also mandates social media companies publicly post their policies regarding "hate speech," "disinformation," "extremism," and "radicalization" on their platforms.

Inside the U.S. Government's Fight to Ban TikTok

The Verge reported:

> For nearly three years, the U.S. government has tried to ban TikTok. Concerns over the app's alleged risks to national security have spanned two presidential administrations and forged alliances among Republicans and Democrats. At a time of heightened partisanship, TikTok and its Chinese parent company, ByteDance, have become the focus of anti-China policy — a convenient villain most lawmakers are prepared to fight.
>
> Last month, that outrage hit a fever pitch. The Biden administration reportedly threatened to ban TikTok if it didn't find an American owner. House lawmakers brought the company's CEO, Shou Zi Chew, in for an explosive hearing. At the same time, a group of senators introduced the RESTRICT Act, a bill authorizing the government to ban the app and others like it. This maelstrom of action has proved that the government is more determined to ban TikTok than ever before.

But with a ban seemingly on the horizon, critics fear actions to take TikTok offline could do more to chill free speech on the internet than to protect the safety and security of American user data. Other experts argue the government's attacks against the app are unjustified, claiming there's little evidence to prove the app has inflicted more harm than Facebook or Google.

Montana Close to Becoming 1st State to Completely Ban TikTok

Associated Press reported:

> Montana lawmakers moved one step closer Thursday to passing a bill to ban TikTok from operating in the state, a move that's bound to face legal challenges but also serve as a testing ground for the TikTok-free America that many national lawmakers have envisioned.
>
> Montana's proposal, which has backing from the state's GOP-controlled legislature, is more sweeping than bans in place in nearly half the states and the U.S. federal government that prohibit TikTok on government devices.
>
> The House endorsed the bill 60-39 on Thursday. A final House vote will likely take place Friday before the bill goes to Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte. He has banned TikTok on government devices in Montana. The Senate passed the bill 30-20 in March.

European Data Protection Board Launches ChatGPT Task Force

Gizmodo reported:

> The EU's European Data Protection Board, or EDPB, is launching a task force to monitor ChatGPT, a move that indicates that the bloc's privacy regulators are getting serious about looking into the LLM's potential privacy violations.
>
> The EDPB announced its new initiative in a brief, two-sentence statement in a press release on Thursday, the same day the Spanish Data Protection Agency, known as the AEPD in Spanish, stated it was launching a preliminary investigation into OpenAI over possible privacy violations by ChatGPT. The Spanish regulator joined Italy, which became the first country in the world to ban ChatGPT, albeit temporarily, in scrutinizing the chatbot.
>
> The EDPB is charged with ensuring the General Data Protection Regulation, Europe's landmark privacy law, is applied consistently throughout the EU and includes the data protection authorities of each member state. The Spanish regulator had asked the board to review the ChatGPT issue last week due to the chatbot's "large potential impact on the public's privacy rights."

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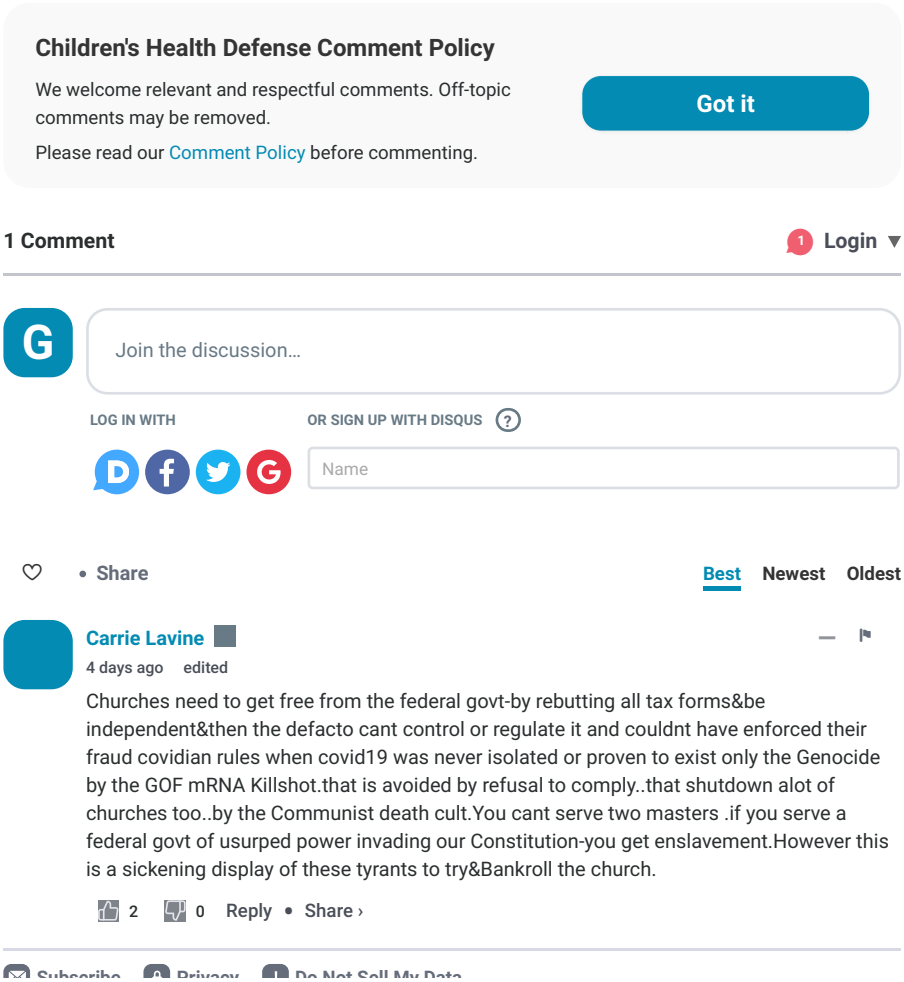

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